

# **FNS Research and Evaluation Priorities for Food Stamp Nutrition Education**

**Post SNE Workshop  
7/30/03**

## **Introduction**

**Hello. I'm Carol Olander. I am with the Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation where my interests and responsibilities overlap with yours – preparing and sharing the food stamp nutrition education story. A lot is riding on how well we do, and this workshop is designed both to advance our collective knowledge and to strengthen our partnerships.**

**Public policy evaluation, in general, and the assessment of food stamp nutrition education, in particular, benefit from the contributions of different levels of government, multiple disciplines, and various stakeholders. I am hopeful that this workshop is just one step in an on-going collaboration to ensure that food stamp nutrition education is science-based.**

**But right now, I want to share a picture of how the Food and Nutrition Service is thinking about FSNE research and evaluation and then highlight key Agency activities that are a part of that picture. You should each have a copy of the FSNE Evaluation Pyramid.**

## **The Pyramid**

**The four evaluation questions shown here address different dimensions of a more fundamental one --- *What Do We Get from Food Stamp Nutrition Education?***

**Interest in the answers is keen – in part, because of the growth in expenditures over the last eleven years and in part because of the search for ways to reduce the prevalence of obesity and diet-related diseases.**

## **Formative Evaluation**

**At the base of the pyramid are the questions associated with developing and refining educational interventions? Who is the appropriate target audience? What determines behavior change among members of the target audience? Are the messages and activities meaningful to the target audience?**

**Answers to such questions can make the difference between an intervention that succeeds or fails.**

## **Process Evaluation**

**Moving up the pyramid, are questions involving the ongoing nature and scope of nutrition education activities. What messages are delivered? Who are the target audiences? How many people are reached?**

**Answers to these questions serve a basic accountability function. The data tell stakeholders how resources, including political support, are being used.**

**Such descriptive information can also signal whether or not educational services are being delivered as intended. This allows for mid-course adjustments to improve the intervention.**

## **Impact Evaluation**

**Next are the questions involving nutrition education impacts. Does it work? While the question appears simple, a meaningful answer requires careful research design, including the use of sound outcome measures that are appropriate to the intervention.**

**Without some information about the education services provided, even a methodologically strong impact evaluation cannot tell us why an intervention worked or did not.**

## **Population Surveillance**

**Politicians and other policy makers are often focused on the pyramid tip where the questions focus on the bottom line. Is the problem less prevalent?**

**Positive results from a small scale impact evaluation may be less relevant than broader population changes.**

**At the same time, decision makers may only require evidence that improvements are associated with the introduction of certain policies or interventions. It may not be necessary to eliminate other possible explanations for the change.**

### **FNS Priorities**

**I'll use the rest of my time to describe where on the evaluation pyramid FNS is currently focused – and that is with formative and process evaluation – the bottom half of the pyramid.**

**A couple factors converge to make this the logical choice. First, limited resources necessitate some selection. Second, sound formative and process evaluation are the first steps to developing effective interventions and documenting accountability.**

**The Agency is beginning a full review of food stamp nutrition education policy objectives. Our immediate information need is for a full and clear description of what, how and why States and local projects make the choices they do.**

**While state FSNE plans and annual reports contain substantial information, they are designed to meet the requirements of the Agency's individual state review and approval process. Consequently they are not well suited to conveying a clear national picture. Specifically,**

**for many states, information is presented by individual project rather than integrated. This is the first year the Agency has explicitly requested an integrated summary to be submitted with each plan;**

**information is provided in a way that may leave gaps and alternative interpretation;**

**little information is available in these documents to explain the context and rationale for the choices made; and**

**their narrative format makes it time consuming to access information.**

**This September, FNS will award competitively a contract to conduct a food stamp nutrition education systems review. The two-year effort will be national in scope with information collected from all States and a representative sample of local FSNE projects. Kristen Hyatt, from the Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation will be the FNS project manager.**

**Not only will the results of this analysis provide an integrated and comprehensive picture of FSNE, patterns may emerge that indicate specific issues that need to be addressed. Ultimately, the information obtained through this study will offer a foundation for developing the Agency's future research and evaluation agenda.**

**At the same time, an effort is underway to create an administrative reporting system in order to routinely update the FSNE description. Judy Wilson, Director of the Nutrition Services Staff is on tomorrow's agenda to talk in more detail about this information system and inclusive process that will be used to develop it.**

**For the moment, just note that we recognize many States have descriptive data collection systems and that all of you have ideas about what such a system should be like. Tomorrow provides an initial, but not the only, opportunity for providing input.**

### **The "Longer" Term**

**Today, there are no FNS plans to address nationally the impact and outcome questions that are represented in the top of the evaluation pyramid. We recognize that many States are interested and/or engaged in such research and acknowledge that the Agency has some leadership responsibilities in this area.**

**In the near term, our efforts will have two emphases:**

- 1) to encourage, where appropriate, the use of nutrition education interventions that are science-based, as well as implementation of these interventions that is consistent with their intended use; and**
- 2) to consider targeted technical assistance that contributes to the soundness and usefulness of impact and surveillance research efforts.**

**While FNS has some unique responsibilities, we are not so presumptuous to think that we can be effective operating unilaterally. All of us have an obligation to use existing opportunities and seek new ways to share experiences, knowledge, and tools so that decisions are science-based, and we can tell a compelling food stamp nutrition education story.**

**Your participation in this workshop is a step toward a more vital partnership!**

**Food Stamp  
Nutrition  
Education**

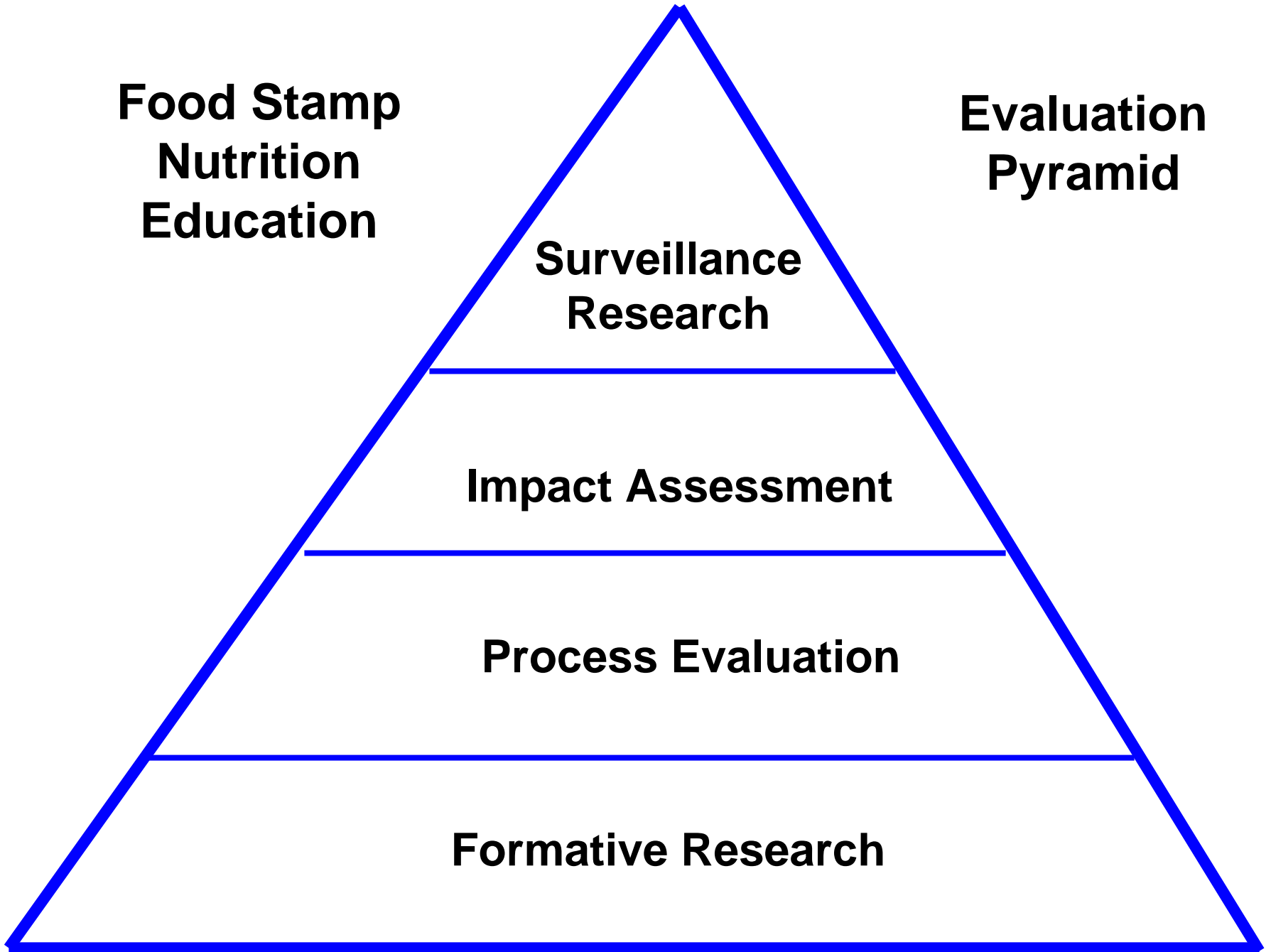
**Evaluation  
Pyramid**

**Surveillance  
Research**

**Impact Assessment**

**Process Evaluation**

**Formative Research**



# Food Stamp Nutrition Education

# Evaluation Pyramid



Are people more  
healthy?



Does FSNE work?  
What works?



How does FSNE Look?  
How are resources used?



What does the Target Audience need?  
Which messages and activities are meaningful?



How does Agency Policy Support Science-based Nutrition Education efforts?